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Acid rain is no longer a threat; it is a staggering national problem. Its legacy of damaged waters, forests, farmlands, buildings, and monuments, combined with overwhelming scientific data, has finally left even President Reagan conceding that a control strategy is necessary and inevitable.

The critical question is what form an acid rain program should take. Last year the House and Senate tried, but failed, to adopt a Clean Air Act reauthorization that included strong acid rain protection. But last year's acid rain proposals collided with convincing economic arguments: the proposals could either cause 100,000 jobs to be lost or drive consumer rates up by as much as 40%.

Today/yesterday Rep. Sikorski breaks/broke new ground in the acid rain debate by introducing a bill that reconciles these three important goals. His legislation would bring significant pollution reductions without causing either unemployment or consumer hardships.

That the bill is introduced at all punctures the Administration's favorite environmental myth, which holds that environmentalists, and environmentalism, are incapable of accomodating economic realism with resource protection. In truth the Sikorski bill does this very well; indeed, it may actually result in a net employment increase.

Rep. Sikorski first departs from prior acid rain control proposals by recognizing that acid rain respects no state boundaries. Although acid rain's focus has been on the Northeast, the Rocky Mountains and other western areas suffer from significant acid damage. Artificial, unmanageable deposition regions are placebos. Only a comprehensive forty-eight state program can deal with this national problem.

Just as importantly, the bill obtains most of its emission reductions by identifying a group of plants that emit the largest amount of sulfur dioxide and requiring that they install pollution control technology. Since the bill calls for steep reductions (14 million tons by 1993) and many plants have already installed the needed technology, requiring the largest polluters to do their share is the most effective and fairest way of cutting emissions.

Further emission reductions would be achieved through state acid rain plans. The bill neither requires nor prohibits any reduction method; the states can design control strategies that best meet their individual needs.

Because most of the bill's emission reductions would come through technological solutions, the potential employment shifts possible under previous proposals would be averted. However, the needed technology is expensive, and consumers served by an affected utility could face chilling rate increases.

For this reason, Rep. Sikorski has developed a capital fund that reimburses companies investing in pollution control equipment. This fund would be financed through a small fee on most electricity generated. For most consumers the fee would amount to no more than fifty cents per electric bill.

In short, at a minimal cost to consumers, and without any major employment shifts, Rep. Sikorski has designed a program that controls acid rain even more effectively than any previous legislative proposal.

Despite its positive features, the Sikorski bill is not the final word in acid rain legislation. The bill's fragile balance, which puts Colorado in harmony with Pennsylvania, may stand further revision. But it stands as solid starting point for our trek through the Clean Air Act reauthorization.